DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 356 716 HE 026 372

AUTHOR	Berkowitz, Susan G.
TITLE	Satisfactory Progress Rules and the Grades of Students.
INSTITUTION	Westat, Inc., Rockville, MD.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Policy and Planning (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	Dec 92
CONTRACT	LC89082001
NOTE	37p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Tests/Evaluation Instruments (160)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Colleges; College Students; *Eligibility; Federal Aid; Federal Legislation; *Federal Regulation; Government School Relationship; *Grade Inflation; Grade Point Average; Higher Education; Standards; *Student Financial Aid; Two Year Colleges
IDENTIFIERS	*Higher Education Act Amendments 1986

ABSTRACT

This study examined how secondary institutions define and implement institutional academic standards and progress requirements for federal financial aid recipients and how the federal requirements for academic progress affect the distribution of grades at these institutions. The study used a mail survey of a nationally representative sample of 200 two-year and four-year postsecondary institutions, and case studies of a sample of six four-year and 3 three-year institutions. The study found that the federal requirement that students receiving federal student financial assistance show a cumulative C average by the end of the second academic year has had little impact on the definition or implementation of academic standards, on aid recipients themselves, or on grades or grading practices at either type of institution. The study also found that most institutions maintain minimal academic standards consistent with or more exacting than the C average by the end of the second year, that enactment of the federal regulations has had no grade inflation impact, and that 86 percent of institutions would not change the requirements if they could. Appendixes contain information on methodology and a copy of the survey questionnaire. (JB)

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SATISFACTORY PROGRESS RULES AND THE GRADES OF STUDENTS

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SATISFACTORY PROGRESS RULES AND THE GRADES OF STUDENTS

Susan G. Berkowitz, Ph.D.

Prepared under contract for
the Department of Education by:

Westat, Inc.
Rockville, Maryland
Contract No. LC89082001

December 1992

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The **Study of Satisfactory Progress Rules and the Grades of Students** was conducted by Westat, Inc., under contract to the Planning and Evaluation Service, Postsecondary Education Division, of The U.S. Department of Education. Gregory Henschel and Maureen McLaughlin, of that office, provided valuable guidance in both study components.

A number of people at Westat should be acknowledged by name for their contributions to this study. Dr. Alexander Ratnofsky provided overall direction to the effort. Ms. Ginny Grimes supervised the mailout of the surveys, oversaw receipt control, and managed the telephone interview staff. Annie Lo served as the project statistician, and John Brown was the project programmer.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Section 484(c) of the Higher Education Amendments of 1986 mandated that students maintain good academic standing in order to continue to receive federal student financial assistance. This was defined in the Act as a cumulative C average, or 2.0 out of 4.0, or its equivalent, by the end of the second academic year. These requirements appear to have had little impact on the definition or implementation of academic standards, on aid recipients themselves, or on grades or grading practices at either 2-year or 4-year postsecondary institutions. This lack of impact is understandable, since the 1986 Amendments left institutions the option of substituting their own institutional GPA requirements for the 2.0 standard. Consequently, except in the very few cases in which there were no academic standards previously (there was only one such institution in the national sample), the Section 484(c) Amendments never really forced institutions to change their standards or practices.

On the other hand, the vast majority of institutions comply with the intent of the 484(c) Amendments in that their requirements are either consistent with or more rigorous than those mandated by section 484(c). Further details of the study's findings include the following:

- Most institutions maintain minimal academic standards consistent with, or more exacting than, a 2.0 by the end of the second year. Less than one-tenth have institutional standards which are lower than this. Moreover, although the Section 484(c) requirements are written in such a way as to leave open the possibility that an institution may define different standards for financial aid recipients and all other students, most institutions apply the same standards to all.

- Enactment of the Section 484(c) requirements has had a very limited impact on how institutions define or implement GPA requirements either for receiving financial aid or for maintaining matriculation. Relatively few institutions have changed either set of standards since the 1986 Amendments, and fewer still have made changes that might have been influenced by their enactment. Similarly, although nearly all 2-year and 4-year institutions maintain consistent procedures for implementing these standards, these implementation procedures were largely in place prior to the 1986 Amendments, and have not been changed since.

- Enactment of the Section 484(c) requirements has also had no significant impact on grades at either 2-year or 4-year institutions. The concern that enactment of these requirements might have led to grade inflation would thus seem to have been largely unwarranted. Case studies performed at a range of types of institutions showed that few faculty are aware of the Section 484(c)

requirements per se, or of which students are receiving federal financial aid. It was also thought unlikely that the financial aid office would have sufficient clout within the institution to influence grading standards or practices, because especially at 4-year institutions, grading tends to be a carefully defended faculty prerogative. Consequently, no mechanism was found, apart from the entreaties of individual students, through which the Section 484(c) requirements systematically impact student grades.

- Fully 86 percent of institutions would not change the Section 484(c) requirements if they could. Most believe that very few otherwise eligible students have been excluded from receiving financial aid for failure to meet these requirements.

INTRODUCTION

Section 484(c) of the 1986 Amendments to the Higher Education Act defines satisfactory academic progress for purposes of continued receipt of federal financial aid as having attained, by the end of the second academic year, a cumulative C gradepoint average (GPA), or its equivalent, or academic standing consistent with requirements for graduation as determined by the institution. Section 1301 of the 1986 Amendments mandates the Secretary of Education to conduct a study of the impact of the amendments on the grades of students, and to assess the implementation of these requirements.

The Study of Satisfactory Progress Rules and the Grades of Students was designed to fulfill this mandate. The study had two main objectives:

- To determine how postsecondary institutions define and implement institutional academic standards and satisfactory progress requirements for federal financial aid recipients, and to see whether and how these had changed since the enactment of the Section 484(c) requirements; and
- To assess the impact of the Section 484(c) requirements on the distribution of grades at postsecondary institutions, and also to consider their possible impact on grading practices and standards.

This report presents the study findings as they address these two main study objectives. The findings are based on the results of a mail survey of a nationally representative sample of 200 2-year and 4-year postsecondary institutions, and on case studies conducted of a purposive sample of six 4-year and three 2-year institutions. A more complete, detailed account of the case study component and its findings is presented in a separate report.[1]

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[1] S.G. Berkowitz, Satisfactory Progress Rules and the Grades of Students: Report on the Case Study Component, Report to U.S. Department of Education, Office of Policy and Planning, 1992.

DEFINITION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF INSTITUTIONAL ACADEMIC STANDARDS AND FINANCIAL AID SATISFACTORY PROGRESS REQUIREMENTS

Definition of Institutional Academic Standards

Table 1 presents the minimal academic standards institutions applied to all students in the Fall of 1991, regardless of whether they were recipients of federal financial aid. The table also indicates the confidence intervals around the estimated percentages at the 95 percent confidence level.[2] For 37 percent of institutions, the standard of good academic standing was a 2.0 average or its equivalent, at whatever point in the student's career; another 13 percent also maintained a 2.0 standard and, in addition, imposed a successful completion requirement on all students (e.g., students must complete a certain percent of all courses attempted). In effect, then, about half of the institutions deemed a 2.0 GPA, at whatever point in the student's academic career, as the criterion of good standing.

Twenty-one percent of institutions applied a progressively graduated scale in which students were required to achieve a 2.0 GPA by the time they earn 60 credits (at some of these schools the cutoff was lower than 60 credits, for example, 45 credits) and another 3 percent combined this GPA standard with a successful completion requirement. Hence, a total of 24 percent of institutions required a 2.0 once the student had accumulated 60 credits, which is in most cases equivalent to being a full-time student for two years. Only 4 percent applied a progressively graduated scale that required attainment of a 2.0 only after having taken 60 or more credits, or the equivalent of 2 or more years; and an additional 5 percent set good standing standards below 2.0 (most of these require a 1.8 or a 1.9 GPA). Seventeen percent of institutions did not provide information on their definitions of good academic standing.

To summarize, about three-quarters of institutions maintained minimal academic standards consistent with or more exacting than those requiring a 2.0 by the end of the second year, and only 9 percent had institutional standards which were definitely lower than this. It should be added that this 9 percent of institutions remains in compliance with the Section 484(c)

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[2]For a more detailed discussion of the reliability of survey estimates, see Appendix A to this report.

Table 1. Standards of good academic standing, Fall 1991

Standard	Percent of Institutions*
2.0 GPA or its equivalent	37 (27 - 47)
2.0 GPA or its equivalent and a successful percent completion requirement	13 (7 - 19)
2.0 GPA by 60 credits**	21 (14 - 29)
2.0 GPA by 60 credits and a successful completion requirement**	3 (0 - 5)
2.0 GPA after 61 credits**	4 (1 - 7)
1.0 GPA or its equivalent	5 (1 - 9)
No response	17 (6 - 28)
TOTAL	100

Source: Study of Satisfactory Progress Rules and the Grades of Students, National Survey, U.S. Department of Education, 1992 (survey conducted in 1991).

*Figures in parentheses indicate the confidence intervals around the percentages at a 95 percent confidence level.

**60 credits is equivalent to 2 years of full-time study at most institutions.

requirements so long as they maintain some minimum standards for progress toward graduation for all students at the institution.

The Relationship Between Institutional and Financial Aid Standards

Section 484(c) requirements leave open the possibility that the GPA requirements to which federal financial aid recipients are held may differ from the academic standards applied to all students at the institution. However, 78 percent of institutions indicated that they hold all students to the same standards. The remaining 22 percent was divided among institutions that did not respond, did not respond clearly, or have separate standards for financial aid recipients. The number of institutions that clearly stated that they had separate standards for financial aid recipients was too small to provide a reliable estimate. The survey responses thus indicate that the vast majority of institutions apply the same minimum GPA standards to federal aid recipients as they do to all other students.

Findings from several case studies help to clarify these responses.[3] Many of the college and university administrators who were interviewed did not really make a distinction between institutional standards and the Section 484(c) requirements per se--probably because in most cases the two sets of standards are indeed the same. Furthermore, respondents at these institutions generally disagreed that the federal government should impose different sets of standards on financial aid recipients, feeling that a double standard would be inequitable and also difficult to administer.

Changes in Institutional Academic Standards and Financial Aid Satisfactory Progress Requirements Since 1986

Since 1986, only about one-quarter of institutions have made any changes at all in any aspect of their institutional academic standards, including their minimum GPA requirements. Of these institutions, only a small number have altered their GPA standards in any way during this period, most making GPA requirements more rigorous by requiring a 2.0 GPA. In summary, very

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[3]Please see Section 1 of Appendix A for a discussion of how to interpret the case study findings in relation to the national survey results.

few institutions have changed their institutional GPA standards in a way that might have been motivated by the Section 484(c) requirements.

A total of about one-third of institutions report having changed either their satisfactory progress requirements for financial aid recipients, or how these requirements are implemented, since 1985-86. Of those that did make such changes, institutions were almost evenly split between those that have altered the definition of the requirements and ones that have made changes in the processes and procedures of implementation. However, of institutions that altered the definition of the financial aid satisfactory academic progress requirements during this period, very few noted having made changes in the GPA standards. Rather, most of these institutions reported having changed their requirements for satisfactory completion of a given percentage of all courses attempted.

Thus, the Section 484(c) requirements have had little impact on how institutions define either institutional standards for all students or satisfactory academic progress standards for financial aid recipients. Similarly, these requirements appear to have had, at best, a minor effect on how institutions implement the satisfactory progress requirements for students receiving financial aid.

Implementation of the Section 484(c) Requirements

According to the national survey performed for this study, the financial aid office is regularly informed of students' academic standing at virtually all (97 percent) institutions. At 13 percent of institutions, this information is regularly provided more than once every grading period, and at 75 percent, this occurs every grading period. At 6 percent of institutions, grade information is regularly conveyed to the financial aid office once a year, and at another 5 percent, the financial aid office is kept informed of student academic standing twice a year or more. Several institutions further volunteered that their financial aid offices can access the student data base at any time; others reported that, in addition to receiving grade data, their financial aid offices are kept regularly informed of student attendance or of any drops or withdrawals.

Of the three-quarters of institutions that further described their procedures for implementing the Section 484(c) requirements, more than half indicated that grade information is

not only relayed but also actively monitored by the financial aid office each term or semester, rather than just at the end of the year. Just under half also indicated that students falling below the minimum GPA requirements are placed on financial aid probation for one term or quarter, and subsequently lose their aid if they fail to raise their grades sufficiently after the probationary period.

Nearly all (87 percent) institutions indicate that they have some procedure that students may use to appeal a decision to terminate their financial aid for failure to meet minimal GPA requirements. A total of 80 percent of institutions describe a process that involves filing a written petition with a dean, a committee, the president or director of the school, the financial aid director, or some combination of these; out of this 80 percent, 16 percent of institutions specifically described procedures with more than one level of written appeal--e.g., the student can first appeal to the financial aid director, then to a dean or the president of the institution. Finally, 8 percent of institutions described a more informal appeal process--for example, they noted that the appeal is made in person rather than in writing or that an effort is made to resolve the problem without going through specified formal channels.

About two thirds of the respondent institutions provided data on the number of such appeals heard in the 1989-90 academic year. The number of appeals per institution ranged widely, from 1 to 1,400, with about half of institutions reporting 100 or fewer appeals. Overall, 72 percent of appeals were granted, with a similar approval rate at 2-year and 4-year institutions.

The processes of implementation of institutional academic standards and financial aid satisfactory academic progress requirements were explored through case studies. Broad similarities were found across the case study institutions in procedures for notifying students when they are in academic jeopardy and for appealing dismissal from the institution. In general, students are informed by letter, on their grade report forms, or both, that they have been placed on probation or dismissed. They are advised that they can appeal dismissal, in writing, if they can provide an explanation and supporting evidence documenting the existence of extenuating circumstances, such as illness or family problems, that interfered with their ability to perform academically.

Differences were found, primarily between the 2-year and 4-year case study institutions, both in who determines academic standards and who is responsible for implementing

them. In general, the faculty has ultimate authority in determining academic standards at the 4-year institutions, whereas joint faculty and administrative bodies set academic standards at the 2-year institutions. Deans and their staffs are primarily responsible for implementation of academic standards at the 4-year institutions, but at the 2-year colleges academic standards tend to be administered directly by the registrar and counselors. At the 4-year institutions, student appeals are heard by a faculty committee, a dean, or committees composed primarily of administrative and student services personnel. By contrast, at the 2-year institutions, the appeal process is typically handled through the counselors and the registrar's office.

As might be expected, the case study institutions do not procedurally separate the implementation of institutional academic standards and the Section 484(c) requirements. The dean's office or registrar generally takes the lead in implementing the GPA standards, regardless of whether the student is receiving federal financial aid, and the financial aid office follows suit. For example, the dean's office will inform the financial aid office of which financial aid recipients have been placed on academic probation; these students will then typically be put on financial aid probation for that term or, in institutions without a formal financial aid probation category, will be informed that their aid will continue for one term contingent on their regaining good academic standing by the beginning of the following term. However, the financial aid offices at these institutions also independently track student academic progress, and they monitor and enforce the non-GPA components of the financial aid satisfactory progress policy which apply only to federal financial aid recipients.

THE IMPACT OF THE SECTION 484(C) REQUIREMENTS

The Impact of the Section 484(c) Requirements on Financial Aid Recipients

Data from the national survey of institutions showed that the 484(c) requirements led to no significant changes in the ability of students to retain their financial aid and continue in school. Nearly 70 percent of institutions reported that the proportion of students excused for failure to meet satisfactory progress requirements remained the same since 1985-86. Of the remaining, more institutions reported that the number of such dismissals had dropped than had risen.

- Seven percent indicated that the proportion of students eliminated for violating satisfactory progress rules had dropped considerably.
- Another 6 percent stated that the percentage had dropped somewhat.
- Only 9 percent of institutions reported that the proportion had risen somewhat.
- Another 9 percent said they they had no basis on which to judge this.

Of institutions that stated that the 484(c) requirements had led to dismissals, nearly 70 percent said that, in most cases, these students were making very little, if any, progress toward graduation.

Survey data further show that institutions are basically satisfied with the Section 484(c) requirements, as presently defined. More than 86 percent of institutions stated that they would not change these requirements if they could. Of the 13 percent of institutions that would like to see some alteration in the requirements, the greatest number argue for allowing the institutions and its representatives greater flexability in applying the standards.

The Impact of the Section 484(c) Requirements on Grades

The second of the two main objectives of the study was to determine what impact, if any, the enactment of the Section 484(c) requirements has had on student grades. This study objective was motivated by Congressional concern that enactment of the Section 484(c)

requirements might contribute to grade inflation at postsecondary institutions. In an effort to address this question, all undergraduate grades for 1985-86 through 1989-90 were collected from the 2-year and 4-year institutions in our national survey sample; these data are reported in Table 2.

For students to receive inflated grades as a direct consequence of the requirements, faculty would have to be induced to grade more laxly, especially at the lower reaches of the grading structure, in order to avoid having students lose their financial aid. Hence, another somewhat less direct way of examining the issue of grade inflation was to consider the possible mechanisms within an institution whereby faculty grading practices and standards might have been affected by enactment of the Section 484(c) requirements. This subject could not be effectively or adequately addressed in the national survey, but tentative explanations were provided through site visits to nine case study institutions.

The view at all nine institutions was that, although most faculty know their institution's academic standards, very few know of the Section 484(c) requirements per se. Moreover, few are aware of which of their students are receiving federal aid. Study informants agreed that the most likely way for an instructor to discover that a student is an aid recipient would be for the student to say so, and that very few students would use threatened loss of aid as a way to attempt to influence an instructor's grade. Moreover, since in most cases the financial aid satisfactory progress requirements and the institutional standards are the same, there would be no reason to raise this issue. Thus, apart from any indirect effect the Section 484(c) requirements might have had through influencing the institutional standards, faculty grading practices appear to have been virtually unaffected by the enactment of these requirements.

Moreover, strong doubts were expressed, particularly at the 4-year institutions, about the ability of the financial aid office to have a major influence in defining institutional academic standards or in affecting faculty grading practices, given that the right to set and monitor grading standards is carefully guarded by the faculty as an academic prerogative. Nor was it regarded as desirable, by any of the respondents, including the financial aid directors, that the financial aid office should act in this way.

Table 2. **Percent distribution of all undergraduate grades at 4-year and 2-year institutions 1985-86 to 1989-90 (in percents, with lower and upper bounds of the 95 percent confidence interval)**

Type of Institution	Grade	1985-86	1986-87	1987-88	1988-89	1989-90	Percent Change
4-YEAR	A	26.0 (23.2-28.8)	26.8 (24.6-29.1)	27.2 (25.0-29.5)	27.8 (25.6-29.9)	28.3 (26.0-30.6)	+2.3 (+1.5-+3.1)
	B	30.8 (28.2-33.5)	31.0 (28.4-33.6)	31.4 (29.3-33.6)	31.5 (29.4-33.6)	32.0 (30.5-33.5)	+1.2 (-0.3-+2.7)
	C	20.6 (19.4-21.9)	20.4 (19.1-21.7)	20.2 (19.1-21.3)	19.8 (18.7-20.9)	19.6 (18.8-20.5)	-1.0 (-1.7- -0.2)
	D	5.7 (5.1-6.3)	5.6 (5.0-6.2)	5.4 (4.9-6.0)	5.3 (4.7-5.9)	5.3 (4.8-5.8)	-.4 (-0.6- -0.1)
	E & F	4.0 (3.6-4.5)	3.9 (3.5-4.3)	3.8 (3.5-4.2)	3.8 (3.4-4.2)	3.6 (3.2-4.0)	-.4 (-0.7- -0.2)
	Subtotal Letter	87.1 (80.9-93.4)	87.7 (81.9-93.8)	88.1 (83.1-93.3)	88.1 (83.3-93.0)	88.9 (85.0-92.9)	+1.8 (-0.8-+4.3)
	Pass & Satisfactory	5.9 (1.2-10.6)	6.0 (0.8-11.0)	5.8 (1.5-10.0)	6.0 (1.5-10.3)	5.6 (2.0-9.2)	-.3 (-1.6-+1.0)
	Fail & Unsatisfactory	1.2 (0.0-2.4)	0.9 (0.1-1.6)	0.8 (0.1-1.5)	0.8 (0.1-1.5)	0.6 (0.1-1.0)	-.6 (-1.5-+0.3)
	Incomplete	1.3 (1.0-1.7)	1.2 (0.9-1.5)	1.2 (0.9-1.5)	1.1 (0.8-1.4)	1.2 (0.9-1.5)	-1.0 (-0.5-+0.1)
	Other	4.4 (2.9-5.9)	4.2 (2.9-5.5)	4.1 (2.8-5.4)	4.0 (2.8-5.1)	3.8 (2.7-4.8)	-.6 (-1.5-+0.2)
	TOTAL	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	–
2-YEAR	A	29.3 (26.7-31.9)	28.8 (26.1-31.5)	28.7 (26.5-31.0)	29.1 (27.3-30.9)	28.6 (26.8-30.4)	-.6 (-2.9-+1.4)
	B	23.8 (22.3-25.4)	24.3 (23.4-25.3)	24.3 (23.3-25.3)	24.6 (23.9-25.4)	23.6 (21.5-25.6)	-2.0 (-3.3-+2.7)
	C	18.1 (16.1-20.1)	17.3 (15.7-18.9)	17.4 (15.9-18.9)	17.3 (15.9-18.7)	16.4 (14.8-18.1)	-1.7 (-2.5- -0.8)
	D	5.6 (4.6-6.6)	5.2 (4.4-6.0)	5.3 (4.4-6.1)	5.2 (4.4-5.9)	4.9 (4.1-5.8)	-.7 (-1.0- -0.3)
	E & F	7.0 (5.7-8.3)	7.2 (6.3-8.1)	7.1 (6.3-7.8)	6.7 (6.1-7.4)	5.9 (4.7-7.1)	-1.1 (-1.6- -0.5)
	Subtotal Letter	83.8 (81.1-86.5)	82.8 (80.3-85.3)	82.7 (80.3-85.2)	83.0 (80.7-85.3)	79.4 (74.0-84.9)	-4.4 (-9.8-+1.0)
	Pass & Satisfactory	3.7 (1.8-5.7)	3.9 (1.9-6.0)	3.8 (1.8-5.8)	4.0 (1.9-6.1)	4.4 (2.7-6.0)	+.7 (-0.3-+1.6)
	Fail & Unsatisfactory	0.6 (0.2-1.0)	0.7 (0.2-1.2)	0.7 (9.3-1.1)	0.7 (0.3-1.0)	1.1 (0.8-1.4)	+.5 (-0.1-+1.1)
	Incomplete	1.2 (0.9-1.5)	1.2 (1.0-1.5)	1.2 (1.0-1.5)	1.1 (0.8-1.3)	1.1 (0.8-1.3)	-.1 (-0.4-+0.2)
	Other	10.7 (7.8-13.5)	11.4 (9.4-13.4)	11.6 (8.9-14.3)	11.3 (8.5-14.1)	14.0 (7.7-20.4)	+3.3 (-1.1-+7.7)
	TOTAL	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	–

Source: Study of Satisfactory Progress Rules and the Grades of Students, National Survey, 1992 (Survey conducted in 1991).

Changes in the Distribution of Grades Between Academic Years 1985-86 and 1989-90

Although research indicates that grade inflation at colleges and universities began in the late 1960s and persisted through the 1970s, it is not clear that this trend also continued during the 1980s. The grade data provided by the respondent institutions should help to address this question for the period between 1985-86 and 1989-90.

Table 2 gives the distribution of all undergraduate grades for each of these years at 2-year and 4-year institutions; the figures in parentheses indicate the lower and upper bounds of the 95 percent confidence interval associated with these percentages. Although the pattern was slightly different for 4-year and 2-year institutions, only very small changes were registered over this period at either type of institution. Once the margin of error around these percentages is taken into account,[4] the only valid conclusions that can be reached are that the percentage of As given at 4-year institutions increased approximately 2-3 percent in this five year period, and the percentages of Cs, Ds, and failing grades (E /Fs)[5] at both 4-year and 2-year institutions decreased very minutely. Otherwise, the data demonstrate no changes in the distribution of grades at 2-year and 4-year institutions between 1985-86 and 1989-90. For this period, at least so far as these data show, there appears to be no sound basis for the concern about grade inflation.

Perceptions of Changes in Grade Distributions

Regardless of whether they could provide the actual grade data, institutions were asked about their perceptions of changes in the distribution of grades at their institutions. It should be noted that even though the aggregated data indicate no overall pattern of grade change, such changes might have occurred at individual institutions. Forty-five percent of institutions reported that grades had not changed in any significant way over this period. Twenty-seven percent indicated that they thought grades had increased, and 10 percent replied that grades had decreased.

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[4]For a more specific and more technical discussion of the reliability of these estimates, see the appropriate section in Appendix A to this report.

[5]At some institutions a failing grade is designated as an "E" rather than an "F." Es and Fs have been grouped together for purposes of our analysis.

The roughly one-quarter of institutions responding that grades had increased mostly attributed the presumed increase to students being more serious about getting good grades and instructors tending to give higher grades; somewhat fewer thought that grades had increased because students are better prepared before entering school, and fewer still attributed any effect to the Section 484(c) requirements. Other reasons volunteered for the perceived grade increase included raised admission standards; closer monitoring and better advising and other support services; responding to an institutional atmosphere of raised expectations; and procedural rules allowing students to withdraw from classes more frequently or at a later date.

Nearly all of the roughly one-tenth of institutions responding that grades had decreased since 1985-86 thought this was true because students are less well prepared before entering college. About two-thirds of these institutions also attributed the decrease to students being less serious about getting good grades, and about half suggested that grades have gone down because instructors are giving lower grades. Very few attributed any impact to federal satisfactory progress rules.

APPENDIX A

METHODOLOGICAL APPENDIX AND TABLE

APPENDIX A

Section 1: Study Methodology

Sample Selection

For the national survey, a single-stage stratified sample was drawn of 307 postsecondary institutions. The sample was designed to be representative of all Higher Education General Information Survey or HEGIS-accredited 2-year and 4-year private and public colleges and universities in the United States, as well as all proprietary schools offering programs of 2 years or more in length. The sampling frame was constructed from the 1988 Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) Fall enrollment data, collected by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The IPEDS includes about 11,500 postsecondary institutions in operation in 1988 in the United States and its outlying areas. Of these, 3,817 institutions were included in the sampling frame.

These institutions were first divided into four Census Regions (Northeast, Midwest, South, West); they were then further stratified by whether they were public, private, or proprietary; and by undergraduate enrollment size (<4,000, 4,000-9,999, 10,000+), for a total of 36 sampling strata. A systematic sample of institutions was selected from each stratum with a probability proportional to the square root of the size of the 1988 undergraduate enrollment. This yielded a sample of 100 4-year, 100 2-year and 100 proprietary institutions. An additional 7 institutions (two 4-year and five 4-year) were drawn from those (282) for whom no enrollment data were reported in the IPEDS.

The nine colleges and universities (six 4-year and three 2-year) selected for case studies were chosen to reflect a range of relevant institutional characteristics, including size, selectivity, region, and public/private status. However, unlike the institutions in the national survey sample, they are not statistically representative of any larger population. Therefore, the case study findings are <u>not</u> generalizable to the population of 2-year and 4-year postsecondary institutions in the nation, and should not be interpreted in this way. Nevertheless, the case studies were extremely useful in establishing a context within which to interpret the survey results and in highlighting the kinds of intra-institutional processes at work at different types of institutions.

Survey Procedures

On October 1, 1991, the first round of mailings was sent out to 105 2-year institutions, 102 4-year institutions and 100 proprietary schools. The survey instrument (see Appendix B) was accompanied by a letter from the Department of Education, addressed to the president or director of the institution, explaining the purposes of the study and enlisting the institution's participation. Also included was a letter from the Westat project manager providing further explanation of the survey, describing how the institution was selected to be in the sample, stressing the importance of responding, and asking that the instrument be forwarded to the person most appropriate to serve as primary respondent for the institution. In addition, the name and address of this primary respondent was requested for follow-up purposes.

On November 7, 1991, a second round of 210 surveys (60 to 2-year institutions, 57 to 4-year institutions, and 93 to proprietary schools) and accompanying letters was mailed to institutions failing to respond to the first round of mailings or to return a slip with the primary respondent's name and address. After this round, a total of about 45 percent of the 2-year and 4-year institutions had returned surveys. However, just 12 proprietary schools had responded. On this basis, it was decided not to include proprietary institutions in further telephone follow-up activities and to exclude their responses from the analysis of findings.

Between December 9, 1991 and December 30, 1991, the remaining 94 nonrespondent 2-year and 4-year institutions were contacted by interviewers from the Westat Telephone Research Center. All but 12 of those contacted by phone answered the survey. Data collection ended on December 31, 1991.

The overall response rate for the national survey, after seven institutions included in the original sample were excluded as inappropriate, was 87 percent (174/200). Fifty-nine percent (105) of all respondents supplied grade matrices with their surveys. Data were adjusted for nonresponse and weighted to national totals.

Both to limit respondent burden and because numeric data were not always readily available, some items on the questionnaire asked for respondents' opinions or estimates rather than obtaining numeric measures. For example, even institutions unable to report grade data were asked to give their views as to whether grades had increased, decreased, or remained stationary,

and why. Similarly, institutions were asked to estimate the proportion of students excluded from receiving financial aid for failure to meet the Section 484(c) requirements. Data such as these may be biased if the respondents wish to promote a particular viewpoint or are systematically mistaken in their impressions. However, in many cases these data were all that could be obtained and are, therefore, valuable despite their limitations.

Section 2: Reliability of Survey Estimates

Because the national survey findings presented in this report are based on a sample of 2-year and 4-year institutions, they are subject to sampling variability. If the questionnaire had been sent to a different sample, the responses would not have been identical. The standard error is a measure of the variability due to sampling when estimating a statistic. It indicates how much variability there is in the population of possible estimates of a parameter for a given sample size. Standard errors can be used as a measure of the precision expected from a given sample. If all possible samples were surveyed under similar conditions, intervals of 1.96 standard errors below to 1.96 standard errors above a particular statistic would include the true population parameter being estimated in about 95 percent of the samples. This is a 95 percent confidence interval.

Table A-1 presents estimates and standard errors for a number of responses to the national survey. As shown, 75 percent of the respondent institutions reported that student grade information is conveyed to the financial aid office every grading period. The 95 percent confidence interval for this estimate extends from 75-(3.71 times 1.96) to 75 + (3.71 times 1.96), or from 67.7 to 82.3 percent. This means that we can be 95 percent confident that this interval contains the true population values. The 95 percent confidence interval can be calculated in the same way for the other estimates in Table A-1.

Table 1, appearing in the main body of the report, specifies the 95 percent confidence interval for survey responses on definitions of institutional academic standards. Table 2, also in the text, does the same for the grade data reported by 2-year and 4-year institutions for the period from 1985-86 to 1989-90. The last column of Table 2 gives the 95 percent confidence interval for the percent changes between 1985-86 and 1989-90 for each of the indicated grades. It shows that

Table A-1. Estimates and standard errors for selected survey responses

Question Responses	Estimate	Standard Error
Frequency with which financial aid office is informed of student grades		
Every grading period	75%	3.71%
More than once every grading period	13%	3.55%
Once a year	6%	1.87%
Two or more times a year	5%	1.81%
Procedures for appealing termination of financial aid		
Written petition	64%	5.13%
Written petition with more than one level of appeal specified	16%	3.42%
Informal appeal	8%	3.22%
Characteristics attributed to students prevented from continuing their education for failure to meet Section 484(c) requirements		
Most did not meet institution's SAP requirements	78%	5.39%
Most were making little progress toward graduation	70%	5.64%
Most could have benefitted educationally from continuing federal student aid	75%	5.53%

Source: Study of Satisfactory Progress Rules and the Grades of Students, National Survey, 1992 (survey conducted in 1991).

the only 95 percent confidence intervals that do not contain 0 are those associated with As at 4-year institutions and with Cs, Ds, and E/Fs at both 2-year and 4-year institutions. On this basis one can be 95 percent confident that the percentage of As at 4-year institutions increased between 1.5 and 3.1 percent during this period. Similarly, one can be 95 percent confident that the percentage of Cs at 2-year institutions decreased between 2.5 and 0.8 percent. The other indicated decreases are so tiny (e.g., come so close to 0) that they are not really worth noting. For any interval that contains 0, one cannot be sufficiently confident that any change has occurred in the percent distribution of the grade. On this basis, one can conclude that our data do not show any notable pattern of grade change between 1985-86 and 1989-90.

In the few cases in which the number of sampled institutions giving a certain response was too small to provide a reliable standard error estimate, this is noted. Otherwise, responses from a small number of institutions are qualified as such and are not presented as exact percentages.

APPENDIX B

SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

OMB No.: 1875-0065
Expiration Date: 12/31/91

STUDY OF SATISFACTORY PROGRESS RULES AND THE GRADES OF STUDENTS

DIRECTIONS

Section 484(c) of the 1986 Amendments to the Higher Education Act defines satisfactory progress for purposes of continued receipt of federal financial aid as having attained by the end of the second academic year a cumulative C average, or its equivalent, or academic standing consistent with the requirements for graduation as determined by the institution.

Section 1301 of the 1986 Amendments mandates the Secretary of Education to conduct a study of the impact of the amendments on the grades of students. This survey is intended to gather some of the data needed to fulfill this mandate. Further, an assessment of the implementation of this satisfactory progress requirement is needed to inform the Administration and the Congress as they consider possible changes during the coming reauthorization of the Higher Education Act.

Most questions in this survey ask you to circle or check one or more responses that best reflect your knowledge or opinion. Several items ask for a brief narrative response. One item asks for statistical information. Estimates are important if exact data are not available. Although you are not required to respond, your cooperation is needed to make the results of the survey comprehensive and accurate. Your individual responses will be kept confidential and data will only be reported in an aggregate fashion.

We would also like to receive copies of any research you may have conducted at your institution regarding the impact of satisfactory progress requirements on student grades and/or retention rates.

Please use the enclosed prepaid envelope to return the completed questionnaire and any institutional research you may have conducted. Materials should be returned, **within 10 days**, to Westat, Inc.; 1650 Research Boulevard; Attention: Ginny Grimes; Rockville, Maryland 20850. Should you have questions about filling out the survey you may call Ms. Grimes at (301) 294-3923.

Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to the U.S. Department of Education, Information Management and Compliance Division, Washington, D.C. 20202-4651; and to the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reduction Project 1875-NEW, Washington, D.C. 20503.

A. GRADES OF STUDENTS FROM 1986-1990

1. In the matrix below, place the number of each type of grade awarded to undergraduate students in each of the academic years 1985-86 through 1989-90. That is, how many A's were awarded, how many B's, etc. (If you have a grading system that uses numbers rather than letters, cross out the letters in the first column and replace with the appropriate numbers, or number ranges.)

   Please use the space below the matrix to supply any necessary clarification of your response (e.g., the meaning of a certain grade not used at other institutions, or any qualifications to the numbers).

GRADE	1985-86	1986-87	1987-88	1988-89	1989-90
A	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
B	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
C	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
D	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
E	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
F	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Pass	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Fail	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Satisfactory	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Unsatisfactory	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Incomplete	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Other	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
TOTAL	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

B. DISTRIBUTION OF UNDERGRADUATE GRADES

2. Has the distribution of undergraduate grades (percentage of grades of each type) changed at your school since 1985-1986? [CHECK APPROPRIATE RESPONSE AND SKIP]

Grades have tended to increase ..... ☐
Grades have tended to decrease ..... ☐ (SKIP TO Q5)
There has been no change ..... ☐ (SKIP TO Q8)
Don't know ..... ☐ (SKIP TO Q7)

3. More particularly, how would you describe the pattern of increase (e.g., the percentages of "As" and "Bs" have remained stationary, while the percentage of "Cs" relative to "Ds" has increased)?

_____

_____

_____

4. Which of the following do you think has caused this increase in distribution of undergraduate grades? CHECK ALL THAT APPLY, THEN, SKIP TO Q8.

Instructors are tending to grade higher ..... ☐

Students are better prepared before entering school ..... ☐

Students are more serious about getting good grades ..... ☐

Federal satisfactory progress rules are causing poorer performing students to drop out earlier or in greater numbers ..... ☐

Schoolwide satisfactory progress rules are causing poorer performing students to drop out earlier or in greater numbers ..... ☐

Federal satisfactory progress rules are acting as incentives to student to get higher grades ..... ☐

Schoolwide satisfactory progress rules are acting as incentives to students to get higher grades ..... ☐

Other (SPECIFY) ..... ☐

_____

_____

_____

5. More particularly, how would you describe the pattern of decrease (e.g., the percentage of "As" and "Bs" has decreased, while the percentage of "Cs" has increased)?

_____

_____

_____

6. Which of the following do you think has caused this decrease in distribution of undergraduate grades? CHECK ALL THAT APPLY, THEN SKIP TO Q8.

Instructors are tending to grade lower ..... ____

Students are less prepared before entering school ..... ____

Students are less serious about getting good grades ..... ____

Federal satisfactory progress rules are not causing poorer performing students to drop out earlier or in greater numbers ..... ____

Schoolwide satisfactory progress rules are not causing poorer performing students to drop out earlier or in greater numbers ..... ____

Federal satisfactory progress rules are not acting as incentives to students to get higher grades ..... ____

Schoolwide satisfactory progress rules are not acting as incentives to students to get higher grades ..... ____

Other (SPECIFY) ..... ____

_____

_____

_____

7. If you do not know if the distribution of undergraduate grades has changed, are there any specific reason(s) you can think of.

_____

_____

_____

C. IMPLEMENTATION OF INSTITUTIONAL SATISFACTORY PROGRESS REQUIREMENTS

8. What criteria are currently being used to define satisfactory academic progress and/or good academic standing for all students at your school?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

9. a. Have these criteria changed since the 1985-1986 academic year?

YES 1
NO 2

b. If so, when and how have the criteria changed?

_____
_____

10. Is the financial aid office regularly informed about students' satisfactory academic progress/academic standing?

YES 1
NO ..... 2 (SKIP TO Q12)

11. How frequently is the financial aid office informed about students' satisfactory academic progress/academic standing? CHECK APPROPRIATE RESPONSE.

Every grading period ..... ☐
More frequently than every grading period ..... ☐
Once a year ..... ☐
Other (SPECIFY) _____ ☐
_____

12. a. Is there some other mechanism by which the financial aid office monitors students' academic progress?

YES 1
NO 2

b. If so, specify how, and how often, this occurs.

_____
_____

D. KNOWLEDGE AND IMPLEMENTATION OF FEDERAL REQUIREMENTS

Under Section 484(c) of the 1986 Amendments to the Higher Education Act, satisfactory academic progress for continued receipt of federal financial aid is defined as a cumulative C average, or its equivalent, or academic standing consistent with the requirements for graduation as determined by the institution, by the end of the second academic year.

13. How, specifically, are the Section 484(c) requirements defined at your institution?

_____

_____

_____

14. Briefly describe the process/procedures whereby the Section 484(c) requirements are implemented.

_____

_____

_____

_____

15. a. Have these procedures changed since 1985-86?

YES 1
NO 2

b. If so, briefly describe how they have changed.

_____

_____

16. What proportion of those in your institution who grade students are aware of Section 484(c) requirements per se? CHECK APPROPRIATE RESPONSE.

All or almost all are aware ..... ☐
Most are aware ..... ☐
About half are aware ..... ☐
Few are aware ..... ☐
None or almost none are aware ..... ☐
Other (SPECIFY) _____ ☐
Don't Know ..... ☐

17. During the 1989-90 school year, about what proportion of undergraduate students at your school, who were otherwise eligible, were deemed ineligible for and excluded from federal student financial aid because of a failure to meet Section 484(c) satisfactory academic progress requirements? CHECK APPROPRIATE RESPONSE.

None ..... ☐
Some, but under 2 percent ..... ☐
Between 2 and 5 percent ..... ☐
Between 5 and 10 percent ..... ☐
Over 10 percent ..... ☐
Other (SPECIFY) _____ ☐
Don't Know (SPECIFY WHY) _____ ☐

_____

18. How has this proportion changed since the 1985-86 academic year? CHECK RESPONSE.

The proportion has dropped considerably ..... ☐
The proportion has dropped somewhat ..... ☐
The proportion is about the same ..... ☐
The proportion has risen somewhat ..... ☐
The proportion has risen considerably ..... ☐
Other (SPECIFY) _____ ☐
Don't Know (SPECIFY WHY) _____ ☐

_____

19. Is there a procedure students can use to appeal a decision to terminate financial aid for failure to meet Section 484(c) requirements?

YES 1
NO ..... 2 (SKIP TO Q22)

20. Briefly describe the appeal procedure.

_____

_____

_____

21. a. How many of these appeals were heard in the academic year 1989-90?

_____
OF APPEALS

b. What was the outcome?

_____ _____
GRANTED # DENIED

22. Have the Section 484(c) requirements prevented students from continuing their education at your school because of lost eligibility for federal student aid?

Yes ☐
No ☐ (SKIP TO Q24)
Other (SPECIFY) _____ ☐
Don't Know (SPECIFY WHY) _____ ☐

_____

23. Consider those students who were prevented from continuing their education at your school because of lost eligibility for federal student aid due to Section 484(c) requirements. Which of the following are true? (CHECK ALL THAT APPLY)

Most of these students did not meet my school's requirements for satisfactory academic progress ☐

Many of these students would have educationally benefitted from continuing federal student aid ☐

In most cases these students were making very little, if any, progress toward graduation ☐

Other (SPECIFY) _____ ☐

Don't Know (SPECIFY WHY) _____ ☐

_____

24. Would you change the Section 484(c) requirements if you could?

YES 1
NO 2

25. How would you change the Section 484(c) requirements?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Thank you for your participation in this important survey. Also, the inclusion of any pertinent research your institution has conducted is greatly appreciated.